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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Visit of Nicholas Burns and
Gastright, Iraq; Dhaka

Summary: Independent English language newspaper "Bangladesh Observer" commends the U.S. for its stand in favor religious minorities, especially the Ahmadiya community in Bangladesh.

On Iraq, centrist English "News Today" says that there cannot be any real transfer of sovereignty in Iraq unless occupation forces leave the country.

1. The Visit of Nicholas Burns and Gastright

"US Policy And Ahmadiyas"

Independent English language newspaper "Bangladesh Observer" editorially comments (6/30):

On the heels of US Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs Nicholas Burns' visit to Dhaka comes the visit by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia John A Gastright. In the second week of May last Christina Rocca, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, was also on a diplomatic tour to Bangladesh. Their visits plus the US Ambassador Harry K Thomas's departure certainly signal reorganization, if not changes, in the US policy towards Bangladesh. Nicholas Burns is the highest official after ex-Foreign Secretary Collin Powell who came to Dhaka in 2003, to have flown to Dhaka on a diplomatic tour. During his stay, the Under Secretary raised most of the issues the alliance government is ill at ease to confront. But the message that emerged from reports carried in our press is his expression of hope for a free and fair general election to be held next year. It is believed his was a kind of fact-finding mission which will enable him to prepare a report on Bangladesh. His report and those submitted by others who have visited or are visiting Bangladesh will be the basis of the US government's policy towards Bangladesh.

If Nicholas Burns has focused in general all the irritating issues along with the positive developments now taking place in our country, Gastright has taken up specific issues for immediate addressing. It is good to know that he held a meeting with the Ahmadyia leaders and did some straight talks. We have time and again appealed to the government to effectively address the problem facing the community but to no avail. Neither criticism nor constructive suggestions could move the government to act decisively against the zealots spearheaded by an extremist outfit called Khatme Nabuat. The government, moreover, gave the impression that it has a tacit support for the fanatic movement against the sect. It made a blunder (or was it part of its policy?) when it capitulated to the Khatme Nabuat's demand for banning the Ahmadiya publications. That was an encouragement for the religious bigots to press for their more outrageous demand for declaring the Ahmadiyas non-Muslims.

The government did not-or better say could not-give in to the demand in the face of growing criticism from the press, civil and human rights groups, diplomats from different embassies and high-commissions in Dhaka and the international community. The Khatme Nabuat also pushed ahead more aggressively with their agenda. Their movement grew so violent that the police had to pull down the sign boards from the Ahmadyia mosques to be replaced by ones on which 'place of worship' is written. What prompted the government to follow the policy of pampering the religious fundamentalists is best known to it, but it has caused irreparable damage to the country's secular character and image abroad.

We are happy that the US Deputy Assistant Secretary has called the spade a spade and by doing so, he has given a message to the Bangladesh government. Although belated, yet it is likely to have some effect on the alliance government. We can surely expect Gastright to take a similar stand during his official meetings with government functionaries here. The ban on the Ahmadiya publication should be withdrawn immediately. Will the Deputy Assistant Secretary make an issue of it? He has made known his feeling by saying that the 'government has the ability to protect' the Ahmadiyas. His intention is clear. If he presses for the

withdrawal of the ban on Ahmadyia publications, he will know how serious the government is to uphold the rights of the minority people, including the Ahmadyias. He will have done a much-needed service for an oppressed community.

[12. Iraq](#)

"The fairy tale of power transfer in Iraq"
Centrist English language newspaper "News Today"
editorially comments (6/30):

By the time this appears in print, President George W. Bush would have delivered his "important" speech marking the first anniversary of "transfer of sovereignty" in Iraq. One year ago this day, a new group of indigenous Iraqis had taken over following an election which many across the world considered as selection by the occupying powers. Not really to hand over power to the Iraqis but to hoodwink world opinion in the name of democracy. The transition from Allawais to Jaffaris meant no real change because power still lies with the occupiers. How a country can be sovereign with tens of thousands of alien troops occupying it? In exchange of some crumbs of power all that the new leaders do is signing on the dotted lines. Decisions are made in Washington. So much for the fairy tale of transfer of sovereignty.

That the United States under President Bush would be a bully was never in doubt but what is amazing is the way the rest of the world allows itself to be bullied. Iraq continues to bleed.

It is clear that the Bush administration is now clueless about what to do in Iraq. President Bush himself admits that the situation is difficult but he has no solution to offer. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld thinks it would be years before insurgency in Iraq can be wiped out. All these perhaps point to an indefinite occupation of that oil-rich country. And with the election of a hardliner President in neighboring Iran the situation is much more complicated and dangerous now.

There cannot be any real transfer of sovereignty until occupation forces leave Iraq. So observing the anniversary is a joke. Heavyweights in Washington may not feel ashamed but what is shocking is the world reaction. The UN has washed its hands off as if it has no role in protecting human lives. All we can do is expressing our solidarity with valiant Iraqis who are fighting a heroic war of resistance.

Thomas